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Brider un Shvester? Women in the Tsukunft Youth Movement in Interwar Poland[1]

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Abstract: This article discusses the Bund's gender politics present in Tsukunft, the youth organization of the party. In the interwar period Tsukunft grew into one of the most active and dynamic organizations within the Bundist movement in Poland. The author analyzes Tsukunft's discourse to find out the actual position of the women in the organization. By confronting the organization's material with the sources produced by the movement's women activists, the author tries to find out more about women's experience in Tsukunft. The article therefore incorporates the marginalized narrative of and on Jewish women into modern historiography.

> We, today's youth, celebrate Women's Day as a time for the struggle of the proletariat in general and as our holiday. On this day of struggle and awareness we should demonstrate our ideals and do wide-scale canvassing to attract the educated youth to [our] socialist youth organization.[2]

It was with these words that an author identified only as Bronka concluded her introduction to an issue of Tsukunft's magazine, released on Women's Day in 1920. Did the women really walk arm in arm with their comrades in the organization, however? Who were the young activists? What role for women did the movement promote?

The birth of the Second Polish Republic meant that the Jews found themselves in a new political reality. The process of its formation could not ignore the transformations that were underway in Europe. These included general democratization, but also, undoubtedly, women's emancipation. Both active and passive voting rights to the Legislative Sejm were awarded to women by a decree of the Chief of State on 28 November 1918,[3] while independent legal acts regulated this issue for the local governments.[4] Equal voting rights became an established fact, later confirmed by the March Constitution, giv-

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[2] Bronka, Der internats. froyen-tog, *Sotsyalistishe Yugnt Shtime* 15.03.1920, no. 5 (27), p. 2.

[3] Art. 1 of the Representation of the People Act says: "The voter for the Sejm is every citizen of the state, regardless of sex, who has reached the age of 21 years by the date of election." Art. 7, in turn: "Electees to the Sejm can be all citizens of the state with active voting rights (...)." Quoted from: "Dekret o ordynacji wyborczej do Sejmu Ustawodawczego z dnia 28 XI 1918," *Dziennik praw państwa polskiego* 1918, no. 18, #46.

[4] Women received the right to vote for the regional and city council in the territory of the former Kingdom of Poland. See "Dekret o utworzeniu Rad Gminnych na obszarze b. Królestwa Kongresowego z dn. 27 XI 1918," *Dziennik praw państwa polskiego* 1918, no. 18, #48, Art. 12; "Dekret o wyborach do Rad

ing equal rights to all citizens. Female social activists regarded this as a breakthrough. The publications of Polish women's rights activists are brimming with reflections on the new opportunities that were open to women. They often included observations on the generation that was entering adulthood in a state with equal rights. It was particularly stressed that girls then coming of age in the Second Polish Republic had a clear path to new opportunities of which their mothers were deprived. The female citizens of independent Poland had easier access to education, and above all, to public law. It was pointed out that this also altered relations between the sexes. Young people would now grow up together, often going to school or spending social time together. Friendly relations between boys and girls were, for the "mothers' generation," a sign of the coming times. We should emphasize here that the enthusiasm that activists expressed in the early years of the Second Polish Republic for the prospects of young women did not always correspond to the reality of the situation. The clash between theory and reality was jarring at times, and some of the much-lauded laws were inconsistent with the constitution: for instance, women were barred from serving as judges.[5] Furthermore, although half of the voters in the parliamentary and local elections in the Second Polish Republic were women, only a small group of female activists were part of the representative bodies.[6] At the same time, women's material status again declined. The end of the war meant that the men returning from the front regained their jobs in factories, offices, and the transportation industry. The women who managed to keep their jobs were forced to content themselves with lesser-paid occupations and lower positions. According to the data from the first general census of 1921, the percentage of working women amounted to 23.5%, less than the European average (25-30%). Moreover, among those working there was an alarmingly high percentage (compared to Western Europe) of women employed as servants.[7]

Women's issues also occupied the minds of Poland's Jewish society. The transformations of the turn of the century and the new modernist trends kindled hopes for a better future. These expectations were stimulated by increasingly popular, though often mutually exclusive ideologies and schools of thought: nationalism, socialism, pacifism, and liberalism. Visions of the new world now had to reckon with the promises made to its female inhabitants. Of course, depending on what views were declared, this world was imagined differently. It is important to note that Jewish activists and canvassers from both the right and the left used the tools of propaganda with increasing skill to begin casting people from the younger generation as constructors of a dream world.

As Jolanta Mickutė has noted, Zionism promoted a new type of Jewish woman. She was healthy in both body and spirit, and her basic role was to bear children and to raise them in accordance with the Zionist national tradition. She was also ready to sacrifice herself for her nation. Polish female Zionist activists in the 1920s were thus chiefly active in areas which their men did not usurp for themselves, above all in social aid and education, domains which were perceived as extensions of women's traditional roles. In-

Miejskich na terenie byłego Królestwa Kongresowego wydany w dn. 13 XII 1918," *Dziennik praw państwa polskiego* 1918, no. 20, #58, Arts. 2, 4.

[5] Kałwa 2001, pp. 29-34.

[6] *Ibid*., p. 34.

[7] *Ibid*., p. 37.

terestingly enough, they acknowledged the fact that they were victims of "double exclusion" – as Jews and as women – and they expressed this in Zionist magazines targeted at women, such as *Di Froy* and *Ewa*.[8]

How did revolutionary socialism in its Jewish incarnation perceive women? The response to this question is not a total negation of the Zionist vision, as one might suppose. Naturally, it is hard to find depictions of human physicality in the Marxist image of the world, while people themselves are defined only through their social existence. It is a fact that there were plenty of women among the Bund activists in Tsarist Russia.[9] It was also far easier to name the female thinkers involved with socialism (such as Rosa Luxemburg or Esther Frumkin, to mention only two) than those associated with the national movement.[10] And the Bund anthem itself, written by S. An-ski, begins with a phrase suggesting equal rights: *Brider un shvester!* ["Brothers and sisters!"]. It would seem, however, that despite the declarations of equality, in the Second Polish Republic Bund, as well as its offshoots (including the Tsukunft youth organization), the positions above a certain level remained occupied by thoroughly "male" bodies.

The 1930 calendar prepared for young Jewish workers clearly stated that 45% of Tsukunft activists were young women.[11] The major participation of female activists is also shown through the numerous photographs from the movement's camps, rallies, and trips, in each of which we find that half the faces belong to girls. However, looking at the personnel of the organization's Central Committee in the interwar period, we search in vain for women.[12] With only a few exceptions, the authors of articles on the movement (whether ideological or methodological) were men. At any rate, even the debates that ran in the movement's periodicals seldom strictly concerned women's issues.

The exception to this rule was a series of articles by Sophia Dubnov-Erlich, which made their appearance in 1934 in *Yugnt Veker* magazine.[13] In her private life, the author was married to party leader Henryk Erlich, and was the daughter of a historian, Shimon Dubnov, which was sure to have guaranteed her relative freedom in expressing her opinions. Stressing that she was living in a breakthrough era, which would lead to creating new and better forms of social coexistence, the author turned the reader's attention to the process of creating the "new person." Co-education was meant to be key here: shared learning, play, and the social intermingling of boys and girls.[14] Interestingly enough, the writer also pointed out the double marginalization of women, though the other half of this was not related to Jewishness, but to social class. Thus, women suffered the same exploitation by the privileged class as men, and were, in addition, dependent on men (financially, in particular). According to Dubnov-Erlich, this sort of dependency had to be eliminated. Women had to fight for equal economic status; by earning for themselves, they would cease to apprehend marriage as a road to financial improvement. For Dubnov-Erlich, religion was something that obstructed women's self-establishment, as it tied them conclusively to men. The latter were often alcoholics or inclined to brutal

[8] Mickutė 2014, pp. 137-162.
[9] Davis-Kram 1980, pp. 27-43.
[10] For more on the turn-of-the-century revolutionaries, see Shepherd 1993.
[11] *Arbeter tashn-kalendar*, Varshe 1930, p. 34.
[12] With the exception of Rena Hister Hertz; see Sholem Hertz 1946, pp. 354-355.
[13] The issue of these essentially unique statements is taken up by Jacobs 2009.
[14] S. Dubnov-Erlich, Di naye seksuele etik, *Yugnt Veker* 1934, no. 2, p. 5.

behavior. The author noted that the old ways were difficult to uproot even in enlightened, strong, and well-earning women. They also very frequently remained in marriage bonds with men whom the women no longer loved. As an example of the "new woman" of the future Dubnov-Erlich recalled the protagonist of Feodor Gladkov's novel *Cement* – Dasha Chumalova, liberated from the "yoke" of men and devoted to the socialist cause.[15] In the socialist world all forms of exploitation were to be eliminated. Not only legal changes were needed to reach this goal (civil marriages, the right to abortion, state support in raising children[16]), but mindsets also needed to evolve. Dubnov-Erlich regarded this aspect of the metamorphosis to be the most difficult, though it did remain possible.[17] If the author's postulates were translated from Yiddish into Polish, they would scarcely differ from the catchphrases used by such Leftist journalists as Irena Krzywicka or Maria Morozowicz-Szczepkowska; all the more so in that one hunts in vain in Sophia Dubnov-Erlich's articles for clear references to "Jewish Street."

How far, however, did this task declared by the prominent activist translate into the reality within the movement itself? It is hard to say – all the more so as the young activists often came from very traditional households. In 1925 the organization used the survey printed in their magazine, *Yugnt Veker*, to conduct research to create a portrait of the movement's typical activist.[18] The study, to which 3,889 young people contributed, showed that the respondents were far more religious than the movement's leaders had hoped. Over 50% of the boys responded that they prayed. If we take into account the fact that the respondents knew who was conducting the survey and might well have wanted to adjust their answers to their expectations, we ought to assume that this percentage could have been even higher.[19]

Women were otherwise seldom addressed in articles per se. The exceptions to this rule were the above-mentioned occasional notes for Women's Day[20] or a reportage piece on the fate of women during the Spanish Civil War. This piece mentioned heroic female activists from La Coruña who were courageous in the war efforts, while noting that many women who were utterly apolitical were raped and murdered in the warpath ("their cries and pleas for mercies still ring in my ears").[21]

Apart from this handful of articles for special occasions or those written by Sophia Dubnov-Erlich, the iconography of Tsukunft can tell us a great deal about the image of

[15] S. Dubnov-Erlich, Di seksuele oyslezung fun di froy, *Yugnt Veker* 1934, no. 7, p. 5.

[16] S. Dubnov-Erlich cited the USSR as a model for the correct approach to legal issues. And indeed, immediately following the October Revolution the Bolsheviks introduced a new regulation which changed women's social status in a radical fashion, e.g. through giving women equal rights, legalizing abortion, simplifying divorces, and improving social aid. Discussions on gender roles, sexuality, and the division of labor were raging at the time. This period of inquiry ended, however, when Stalin came to power. The state strove to take full control of its citizens' sexuality, and began to support "pro-life" strategies and a return to traditional family values. In 1930 Stalin dissolved the Department for Women's Affairs (*Zhenotdel*), and in 1936 abortion was delegalized. See, among others, Warshofsky Lapidus 1978, pp. 95-122; Buckley 1989, pp. 128-138; Hoffman 2000, pp. 35-54.

[17] S. Dubnov-Erlich, Egoizm un altruizm in seksueln lebn, *Yugnt Veker* 1934, no. 8, p. 4.

[18] Frage boygn, *Yugnt Veker* 1.05.1925, no. 4, pp. 8-9.

[19] P. Shvarts, Vos dertseylt undz di ankete fun yugnt-bund 'Tsukunft', *Yugnt Veker* 1.05.1930, no. 10, p. 9.

[20] See also: Be-li, Aruf tsu dem proletarishn meydl, *Yugnt Veker* 1.03.1926, no. 5, pp. 7-8; Be-li, Di froy muz zayn sotsyalistisher kemferin, *Yugnt Veker* 1.03.1929, no. 5, p. 3; A gleykher, Der tog fun arbeter froy, *Yugnt Veker* 1.03.1930, no. 6, p. 2.

[21] M. Rouse, Di froyen in di shpanishe tragedie, *Yugnt Veker* 1.07.1938, no. 13, p. 4.

women it created. The covers of the periodicals feature women marching arm-in-arm with their male friends,[22] hiking in the mountains in sports apparel (pants, T-shirts),[23] and canvasing for new Tsukunft members,[24] or dressed in uniforms, hoisting the movement's flag with the men.[25] The magazines often also featured photographs of life in the organization, and if they featured girls, it was usually in the context of sporting events,[26] evening classes,[27] or performances in drama clubs.[28] Dressed in sports gear or in a modern fashion (knee-length skirts, short hairdos, swimsuits), they promoted healthy lifestyles, organized tourism and the cult of the athletic body. Female politicians, such as Rosa Luxemburg,[29] Nadejda Grinfeld (a Bund activist and later a member of the parliament of the Moldavian Republic),[30] and Sophia Perovskaya (an organizer of the coup against Tsar Alexander II) were also mentioned, though not too often.[31] What emerges is a picture of independent, politically minded women keeping in step with the spirit of the times.

The *Zeitgeist* was also thought to be expressed in the Tsukunft female members' approach to fashion and beauty. These facets of life were highly politicized in the 1920s and 1930s. We can see this in a letter written by a female Tsukunft member in 1927:

> A wall often grows between my acquaintances and me. When I meet a girl I've known since childhood – we lived in the same neighborhood or went to the same school, or worked in the same place – I often wish I could slip away. I am repelled by the powder and the lipstick.
>
> I don't know if others feel the same way. But I have an irrepressible feeling when I see someone's face made up: all at once it seems to me that her words are powdered too, they are buffed and polished, and do not come from a pure heart. Of course there's nothing wrong with a woman trying to look beautiful, but I think this can be achieved without making your face white or pink. Instead of powder – the sun's rays! Natural color is prettier. A sun-painted face is the only solution. And if you happen to be ugly, no art or cleverness will come to your aid. A person is also made different on the inside. Words that come from painted lips are tainted from the outset.[32] They bear no resemblance to the voices I heard in childhood, just as I find no likeness to the faces I saw ten years ago. All the innocence of childhood vanishes from such a [painted] girl's face.
>
> Unfortunately, many girl workers don't understand this. They blindly emulate what they see in wealthy women. This is a path to falseness. Working women should also keep their skin fresh-looking and their figure in shape. But this could be achieved through regular physical exercise, muscle development, spending time outdoors, and good clean living.[33]

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[22] *Yugnt Veker* 1.10.1928, no. 19, p. 1.

[23] *Yugnt Veker* 15.06.1931, no. 13, p. 1.

[24] *Yugnt Veker* 1.01.1936, no. 1, p. 1.

[25] *Yugnt Veker* 1.11.1937, no. 24, p. 1.

[26] E.g. *Yugnt Veker* 1.10.1927, no. 19, p. 13.

[27] The pamphlet *Kum mit undz!*, YIVO Institute for Jewish Research, RG 1400, MG 9, #258.

[28] E.g. *Yugnt Veker* 1.03. 1928, no. 5, p. 7.

[29] E.g. *Yugnt Veker* 1.01.1927, no. 1, p. 3.

[30] E.g. *Yugnt Veker* 15.10.1927, no. 20, p. 27.

[31] *Yugnt Veker* 1.03.1927, no. 5, p. 4.

[32] Interestingly enough, they used the Hebrew word *tome*, which pertains to the purification ritual in Judaism.

[33] Mirl Ufsheyn, Vegn a shendlekhe mode, *Yugnt Veker* 1.04.1927, no. 7, p. 13.

As we can see from the above testimony alone, the socialist model for appearance promoted by the organization did not necessarily appeal to the young women of the Second Polish Republic.

As we know, there was no shortage of girls in Tsukunft. How did they arrive in the organization? Responses to this question are suggested by the autobiographies submitted to the YIVO Institute competitions. The Tsukunft girls who sent in pieces were those studying at Jewish general studies secondary schools who were experiencing financial hardships and had taken up work in workshops or factories.[34] As such, they were often second-generation Bund members, or at least had parents who sympathized with the labor movement. Such a small sample cannot, of course, be representative for the movement as a whole, but it does indicate a certain trend, and s that is distinct from the male members of the organization, who frequently opposed their parents to become activists. The reason for this might be found in the trivial observation that, in this traditionally rooted society, it was more difficult for women to tear free, given that they were often mothers in their teens or early twenties. Another path to researching the biographies of the female Tsukunft activists is the epitaphs in the *Doyres bundistn* collection.[35] True, only 51 notes out of 600 concern female activists of the Polish Bund in the broadest sense,[36] and among them, only a few are Tsukunft girls; they do show similar tendencies, however (e.g. Miriam Shifman-Fayner, Tsipora and Brukha Ainshtayn, Asie Big). An exception would appear to be the fate of Włocławek activist Gitl Wiszniewski-Słucka, who apparently came from a very religious family.

Interestingly enough, it would also seem that the girls active in Tsukunft were not indifferent to the thoughts expressed by Sophia Dubnov-Erlich, as indicated by the biography of a female activist submitted in 1934. The 22-year-old Międzyrzec resident concludes her life story by pondering the idea of traveling to the big city, where she could be independent, work in a factory, and possibly avoid a hasty marriage.[37]

Contributing to the movement was surely a crucial part of life for the young female activists, and one that often defined their identities. "Tsukunft is the only place for me!" one of the authors of the autobiographies wrote for the competition. This girl (who, nota bene, signed her whole contribution pack as "Tsukunftistke," i.e. Tsukunft Activist) enclosed her diary from 1938-1939, in which she dutifully noted the fact that she had read the latest issue of *Yugnt Veker*, reported Bund's success in the local elections, and shared her thoughts on the plans for the organization's local unit, which she led.[38]

"Women have always played a vital role in the Bund's struggle to bring about such demands as a shorter work day, higher wages, better living conditions, education for children and youth, (...) the fight against anti-Semitism, Fascism, and war."[39] This would seem hard to oppose, yet we ought to stress that these were generally rank-and-file activists (at least in the Second Polish Republic), who carried out everyday work in the move-

[34] Yiddish-language autobiographies #3759 (1934); #3541 (1939); #3666 (1934); #3749 (1939), YIVO Institute for Jewish Research, RG 4.

[35] Sholem Hertz 1956.

[36] Altogether, 65 notes out of 600 concern female Bund activists (including the Bund in Russian territories).

[37] Autobiography #3759, Yiddish, 1934, YIVO Institute for Jewish Research, RG 4.

[38] Autobiography #3749, Yiddish, 1939, YIVO Institute for Jewish Research, RG 4.

[39] Tsirl Shtayngart, Di froyen in 'Bund', *Unzer Tsayt* 1975, nos 3-4, p. 22.

ment. It would seem that, despite the declarations on the banners, there was a "glass ceiling" of sorts in the Bund youth organization, which meant that men remained the main ideologues and prominent activists of Tsukunft. The struggle for women's rights was not the main task of the organization per se, because it was chiefly concerned with fighting for socialism, which presupposed equal rights. This is also why it was rare that the gravity of women's affairs was stressed in Tsukunft discourse, and thus the youth movement as such, which was a testing ground for change. As Marx taught, gender issues were not meant to create any limitations, and freedom and liberation were to be achieved through conquering nature and oneself. The reality, unfortunately, was often a far cry from these ideals, though the head activists of the organization appeared not to notice.

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